

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3392

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1694

BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, SY

SUBJ: RUMORS OF IMMINENT SARG CABINET CHANGES

1. SUMMARY: LOCAL SPECULATION INCREASING RE IMMINENT CABINET CHANGE. ASAD'S DELAY IN ACTING REPORTEDLY CAUSED BY HIS PREOCCUPATION WITH IRAQI PROBLEMS. PRIMIN AYYUBI, WHO CRITICIZED AT RECENT BAATH PARTY CONGRESS FOR CORRUPTION, WILL PROBABLY BE REPLACED, WITH DEFMIN TLAS, SPEAKER OF PEOPLE'S COUNCIL AL-HALABI, FORMER PM KHALAYFAWI AND FONMIN KHADDAM AS PRIME CANDIDATES. RIF'AT AL-ASAD SEEKING TO EXPAND HIS POWER BASE AMONG STUDENTS AND INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY IN GENERAL. WE UNDERSTAND HE OFFERED MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION BUT WOULD PREFER HEAD REGIONAL COMMAND POLITICAL BUREAU. SARG DECISION-MAKING MACHINERY HAS REACHED VIRTUAL STANDSTILL ON MAJOR ISSUES, LENDING ADDITIONAL CREDENCE TO LIKELIHOOD OF CABINET CHANGES IN NEAR FUTURE. END SUMMARY.

2. RUMORS OF IMMINENT CABINET CHANGES ARE INCREASING IN DAMASCUS. WELL-CONNECTED SYRIAN BUSINESS-
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MAN TOLD EMBOFF MAY 7 THAT DEPRIMIN HAYDAR AND FONMIN KHADDAM

HAD BOTH IMPORTUNED PRESIDENT ASAD RECENTLY TO DECIDE ON NEW CABINET IN ORDER TO CLEAR UP LOGJAM OF DECISIONS THAT HAVE BEEN PILING UP AWAITING DECISION BY "NEW TEAM" ACCORDING TO BUSINESSMAN, ASAD REPORTEDLY CONCENTRATING ON PROBLEMS WITH IRAQ AND UNABLE TO DEVOTE NECESSARY TIME TO FORMATION NEW CABINET. ANNOUNCEMENT WILL THUS PROBABLY BE DELAYED FOR ANOTHER TWO OR THREE WEEKS. ANOTHER USUALLY WELL-INFORMED SOURCE TOLD US THAT NEW CABINET MAY BE ANNOUNCED AS EARLY AS NEXT WEEK.

3. ALL ACCOUNTS AGREE THAT PRIME MINISTER AYYUBI WILL BE REPLACED. WE UNDERSTAND AYYUBI WAS SHARPLY CRITICIZED AT SIXTH REGIONAL BAATH PARTY CONGRESS FOR HIS TOLERATION OF CORRUPTION IN GOVERNMENT AND FOR DELAYS IN IMPLEMENTING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM. ONE OF HIS STRONGEST ATTACKERS WAS RIF'AT AL-ASAD, BROTHER OF PRESIDENT. AYYUBI'S DEFEAT IN REGIONAL COMMAND ELECTION MEANT THAT ASAD WOULD BE VIRTUALLY OBLIGED TO REPLACE HIM AS PRIME MINISTER ACCORDING TO BAATH PARTY PRACTICE. WHILE PRESIDENT REPORTEDLY WANTS RETAIN AYYUBI AND ONE SOURCE STATED SAUDIS HAVE SUPPORTED HIS RETENTION, WE SPECULATE FURTHER REASON FOR DELAY, APART FROM ASAD'S PRE-OCCUPATION WITH IRAQ HAS BEEN PRESIDENT'S NEED TO ENGAGE IN CONSULTATIONS WITH OFFICER CORPS TO ENSURE THAT KEY OFFICERS HAVE THEIR SAY. FACT THAT DEFMIN MUSTAFA TLAS MAY BE A SERIOUS CONTENDER FOR PRIMIN HAS PROBABLY COMPLICATED PROCESS.

4. FORMER PM ABD AL-RAHMAN KHLAYFAWI IS MOST OFTEN MENTIONED AS AYYUBI'S SUCCESSOR. BRITISH EMBOFF TOLD US MAY 7 THAT ASAD TWO WEEKS AGO INVITED KHLAYFAWI TO FORM NEW CABINET BUT KHLAYFAWI LAID DOWN CERTAIN DEMANDS PRIOR TO HIS ACCEPTANCE, SOME OF WHICH PRESIDENT APPROVED AND OTHERS WHICH HE DID NOT. QUESTION NOW, ACCORDING TO BRITISH, IS WHETHER KHLAYFAWI AMENABLE TO MODERATING THESE DEMANDS. IF NOT, ALI AL-HALABI, PRESENT SPEAKER OF PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, MAY BE COMPROMISE CANDIDATE.

5. WILD CARD IN THIS MANUEVERING HAS BEEN PRESIDENT'S CONFIDENTIAL

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BROTHER RIF'AT AL-ASAD, WHO REPORTEDLY WON SEAT ON REGIONAL COMMAND THROUGH HIS OWN EFFORTS. EARLY THIS WEEK RIF'AT SPOKE BEFORE A STUDENT GROUP IN DAMASCUS AND WAS ACCORDED DETAILED PRESS COVERAGE. MAY 6 TELEVISION AND PRESS FOLLOWING DAY THEN HIGHLIGHTED SPEECH AND RECEPTION HE GAVE TO MEMBERS OF LEAGUE OF HIGHER STUDIES AND OTHER SYRIAN INTELLECTUALS. HE HAS ALSO RECENTLY PUBLISHED A BOOK, BASED ON DISSERTATION HE WROTE ON

DEVELOPMENT OF SYRIAN ECONOMY. (HE REPOTEDLY OBTAINED DOCTORATE IN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SCIENCE FROM MOSCOW UNIVERSITY, THOUGH KNOWLEDGEABLE SOURCES REPORT HE SPENT ONLY FEW WEEKS IN SOVIET UNION.) HE IS EVIDENTLY TRYING TO OVERCOME HIS "STRONGARM" IMAGE AND BUILD SUPPORT AMONG SYRIAN INTELLECTUALS AND STUDENT GROUPS, TRADITIONALLY AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF BAATH POWER. THEY ALSO PROBABLY MORE LEFTIST AND IDEOLOGICALLY ORIENTED THAN OTHER GROUPS CONNECTED TO PARTY AND THUS MORE ATTUNED TO RIF-'AT'S REPUTEDLY MORE "PROGRESSIVE" OUTLOOK.

6. ACCORDING TO SYRIAN SOURCE WITH CONTACTS IN OFFICER CORPS OF RIF'AT'S REPUBLICAN GUARD, RIFA'T WAS OFFERED POST OF MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NEW CABINET BUT HE IS MORE INTERESTED IN TAKING OVER POLITICAL BUREAU SLOT ON REGIONAL COMMAND. CABINET POSITION, HOWEVER, WOULD CONFORM WITH GENERAL TENOR OF HIS PUBLIC UTTERANCES ABOUT CONTRIBUTING TO SOLUTION OF PROBLEMS IN ACADEMIC FIELD.

7. COMMENT: IT IS TRUE THAT EVEN BY SYRIAN STANDARDS GOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS HAS SLOWED AND MANY DOSSIERS ARE PILING UP IN PRIME MINISTRY AWAITING CABINET DECISION. THIS LENDS FURTHER CREDENCE TO LIKELIHOOD OF MINISTERIAL CHANGES IN NEAR FUTURE.
MURPHY

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